

EVANGELICAL IMMIGRATION table.

February 6, 2024

Dear Members of Congress,

For many years, our evangelical Christian denominations, ministries and organizations have urged Congress to act in a bipartisan fashion to reform dysfunctional elements of our nation's immigration system, including addressing security at our nation's borders. As such, we are grateful for the efforts of Senators Lankford, Murphy, Sinema and others to seek to forge a bipartisan consensus, now before the Senate as a part of a supplemental spending bill.

The commitment to ensuring a secure, just and orderly border is rooted in our Christian belief that God has ordained government for the purpose of ensuring order and restraining evil. As such, we affirm the bill's inclusion of significant new funds for personnel, infrastructure and technology to improve border security.

Another key priority for evangelical Christians, who believe in the biblical teaching that each human life is made in God's image and must therefore be protected from violence, is to ensure due process for those who profess to be fleeing a well-founded fear of persecution, including those persecuted on account of their Christian faith.

We appreciate that the bill sustains access to asylum processing for those who are able to access ports of entry and keeps in place some important existing processes for individuals to lawfully enter the United States. History has shown that when individuals are unable to access asylum adjudication at lawful ports of entry, it merely encourages desperate individuals, including those with a well-founded fear of persecution on account of their faith, race, political opinion or other qualifying reasons under U.S. law, to cross unlawfully. And when the possibility of being granted asylum is denied at that point, a larger share of individuals seek to evade Border Patrol, presenting a security liability.

The bill provides a more defined initial screening standard for those seeking asylum. Our government should take care not to set such high initial documentary standards that those reasonably likely to ultimately qualify for asylum could be returned to danger or even death, but the situation in recent months – when many individuals who are unlikely to ever qualify for asylum have been released with notices to appear for immigration court, sometimes many years into the future – has proven unsustainable and risks the integrity of our asylum system.



Additionally, the proposed change to allow those who are able to clear an initial screening for potential asylum eligibility to apply for employment authorization more quickly would allow these families to provide for themselves while also addressing labor shortages within the United States. The current situation, where individuals are allowed into the U.S. to pursue an asylum claim but barred (for at least the first six months, and often longer as they require time to prepare and submit an asylum application) from working lawfully, leaves those who want to comply with the law but also must cover their own housing and living costs in an impossible situation.

We also appreciate that this bill includes opportunities for Afghan allies who were paroled into the U.S. several years ago to undergo additional vetting and then apply for Lawful Permanent Resident status, consistent with provisions of the Afghan Adjustment Act, and expands the number of immigrant visas, which should reduce the wait times for individuals waiting on certain family reunification and employment-based visa petitions. And, recognizing the unique vulnerability of children, we affirm that the bill ensures that unaccompanied children 13 years old and under who find themselves in immigration court proceedings should be provided legal representation.

Because ensuring due process for those seeking asylum is such a vital concern, we are concerned with provisions of the bill that would halt access to asylum in certain circumstances allowed under current law when arrival numbers are high. We would prefer a model that would shift asylum processing to be more efficient, halting the process of releasing people with long-out court dates within the U.S., but without compromising the longstanding commitment to due process for those seeking asylum regardless of their mode of entry.

We also note that this bill does not address many other dysfunctional elements of our immigration system that also urgently need bipartisan congressional attention, including our longstanding concern for DACA recipients and other Dreamers. For this reason, we commend the approach of the bipartisan Dignity Act in the House (H.R. 3599), which not only seeks to reform the asylum process and provide far greater funding than proposed by the Senate for border security and asylum processing (\$35 billion total) but also would provide a path to citizenship for Dreamers and would institute a rigorous, restitution-based legalization process for certain other immigrants. Notably the fines, fees and levies charged to immigrants who would qualify to pursue permanent legal status as a penalty for their violation of law under the Dignity Act would more than cover the significant expenditures on improved border security, and would even provide support for education and training of American workers.

We urge you to work together toward bipartisan solutions that address these various challenges in ways that both ensure more secure and orderly borders and also a just, welcoming immigration legal system that affirms the dignity of all human beings. We recognize the political complexities, and the political minefields that you are trying to navigate. We understand that no enduring reforms can happen without bipartisan consensus-building, and we are grateful for your efforts. We pray that God would grant each of you wisdom as you deliberate.

Sincerely,

Evangelical Immigration Table Organizations:

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

Faith and Community Empowerment

National Association of Evangelicals

National Latino Evangelical Coalition

World Relief